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# “A Line Will Take Us Hours Maybe:” Craft and Inspiration from the Ethnography of Poetry

*Technique et inspiration, d'après l'ethnographie de la poésie.*

Anthony K. Webster

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# **“A Line Will Take Us Hours Maybe:” Craft and Inspiration from the Ethnography of Poetry**

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“A line will take us hours maybe:  
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.”  
– W. B. Yeats, ‘Adam’s Curse’  
I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,  
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.  
Maybe at last, being but a broken man,  
I must be satisfied with my heart  
– W.B. Yeats, ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’

## **Introduction**

The William B. Yeats quote from “Adam’s Curse” that begins this article seems to highlight an essential tension between ‘craft’ and ‘inspiration’ in the ideological underpinnings of Western notions of poetry and poetry composition<sup>1</sup>. For Yeats, poetry is a craft that takes “hours maybe,” but it must not seem too much

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1. I would like to thank Rex Lee Jim, Blackhorse Mitchell, Laura Tohe and the many other poets I have worked with for their generosity. I thank as well John Leavitt for asking me to write on this topic. I thank Aimee Hosemann for comments on earlier iterations of this paper. Courtney Handman and James Slotta have been gracious sounding boards as well for some of the ideas taken up here. The concern with a humanities of speaking perspective arose in conversations with Pattie Epps and Tony Woodbury. Tony Woodbury coined the term.

the craft—It must appear as inspiration, “a moment’s thought.” And, of course, as many Yeats scholars have shown, Yeats was an inveterate tinkerer of words (see Bradford, 1965). As Curtis Bradford (1965: VIII) notes, “even though Yeats achieved mastery of the technical means of art rather early in his career, he at no time found the act of writing easy [...] he wrote always in longhand, very slowly, revising as he went along.” Though, as Bradford (1965: 16) suggests, “Yeats at no time in his life regarded poetry as a mode of what is loosely called ‘self-expression’; the very complexity of his concept of the self as involving the ‘mask’ and the ‘anti-self’ make us sure of this [...] still Yeats did believe that the voice of the poet is the voice of a man, that this must be so because poetry is memorable speech and comes from a man.” Yet, of course, one needs also keep in mind Yeats’s concern with the *Spiritus Mundi* (a kind of great or universal memory that provided symbols and images to the poet)—with, that is, inspiration (see Yeats, 1937).

In this article, I want to think through questions of craft and inspiration in the creation of poetry (see Leavitt, 1997c). Yeats provides us one entry point into thinking about craft and inspiration, a familiar entry point for those raised in a Western literary tradition. As a linguistic anthropologist, my interests are in the ways that languages, people (individuals), and cultures are intertwined. I take, then, an ethnographic perspective on the question and a comparative approach as well. In particular, I will juxtapose my work with Navajo poets with the work by Zuzanna Olszewska (2015) on Afghan poets who are refugees in Iran, Flagg Miller’s (2007) discussion of Yemeni cassette poets, Eitan Wilf’s (2011) work on Israeli poetry workshops, and Jillian Cavanaugh’s (2009) work on Bergamasco poets. Along the way, I will make connections with these examples and the Navajo examples I know best. I attend, where possible, to the views of specific poets on the relationship between craft and inspiration. With the Navajo poets, I try and provide enough background to place their views in a context of Navajo framework of meaning and moral responsibility. I am not arguing that this is an unmediated accounting of how Navajo poets compose or come to or create their poetry, but rather that such accounts place their poetry within frameworks of meaningful action. Towards the end of the paper, I will expand my focus a bit and look at some other locales where ethnographies of poetry have been done. The goal is to begin to understand the creating of poetry as social practice. Creating, I should add, is my way of dodging the question of whether or not poetry is written or oral. In point of fact, it is, of course, often both. All of the Navajo poets I have worked with wrote their poetry down, even if some had a preference for performing the poetry orally (Webster, 2009). The written versions and the oral versions of the poem were not identical—word choices were made, pausing was changed (see Webster, 2009: 122-151; Webster, 2015a: 1-88).

There are, also, changes afoot concerning the locus of inspiration and on the purpose of poetry. As more work is done in the ethnography of poetry, flesh will be added to the comments made here. In the conclusion, I will place this work within a broader concern with a *humanities of speaking* approach (Epps, Webster and Woodbury, 2017).

### **Craft and Inspiration in Poetry**

As John Leavitt (1997a: 1) notes, "poetry, or at least the poetic function, would seem to be coeval with human language and humanity." Roman Jakobson (1960: 356), famously, defined the poetic function as, "the set (*Einstellung*) toward the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language." Two pages later, Jakobson (1960: 358) restates this as "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination." Nigel Fabb (2015: 9) defines poetry as, "a text made in a language, divided into sections that are not determined by syntactic or prosodic structures." Formal descriptions of poetry and poetics, from Jakobson (1960) to Fabb (2015), for all their insights into the patterning and structuring of poetic forms, tell us little about how poets conceive of their work. These are views of poetry that, so to speak, "know it when it see/hear it," but tell us nothing about knowing it as poets do it, as it comes to or out of them. Where, that is, does poetry come from? As an anthropologist, I take poetry as a social and cultural practice and thus informed by language ideologies, notions of personhood, aesthetics, sociohistorical milieus, and questions of culturally informed notions of craft and inspiration (among other things) (see Caton, 1990; Leavitt, 1997a, 1997b; Wilf, 2011).

In reviewing the history of Western conceptions of poetry, Leavitt (1997a:17) notes that, "through most of the history of the West, the discourse on poetics has assumed a tension between craft and inspiration as aspects of poetic creation." In this article, I want to track that tension in traditions that are, in various ways, in dialogue with that Western tradition. Leavitt (1997a) suggests that, at least in Western traditions, poetry has been associated with craft and the ancient Greeks and prophecy with the ancient Hebrews of the Bible and as mouthpieces of inspired speech. "Poetry," Leavitt (1997b: 129) suggests, "is thought of as an art, a craft, a 'making.'" On the other hand, Leavitt (1997b: 130) notes that, "prophecy [...] taken in Nora Chadwick's wide sense of 'inspired speech' (1942: 45) [...] is not usually held to be a craft, but the reverse of craft, a *calling* in the most literal sense" [emphasis in the original]. Leavitt (1997b: 130) goes on to suggest that:

The similarities between poetry and prophecy are often claimed against the unenunciated background of this difference between craft and inspiration. A great poet is felt to be inspired; a great prophetic utterance gains some of its power from the poetic nature of the language in which it is couched. This seems true for many traditions, but different traditions offer their own figures for conceptualizing this play of difference and similarity. In the West, the dominant figure seems to be a substantial and quantitative one: the poetic skill that one learns and the inspiration that descends from on high are both treated as spiritual substances with which a person may be more or less loaded. The difference between poet, prophet and lunatic [...] is one of degree. A poet should possess both craft and inspiration [...] the inspiration should come through the craft, a kind of mystical synthesis that generations of literary critics have tried to specify and justify.

Leavitt (1997b: 160) suggests that poetry, “implies an extra level of reflexivity, it has, implicitly, a metalinguistic quality.” For Leavitt (1997: 160) metalinguistic, in distinction from Jakobson’s (1960) discussion of metalinguistics, is implicit in Jakobson’s (1960) discussion of the poetic function of language because it “at least implies, and at most provokes, an awareness of language in its complex materiality.” On the other hand, prophecy has a “flattening of levels of reflexivity, it is the reverse of metalinguistic” (Leavitt 1997b: 160). Leavitt (1997b: 161) calls this, this opposite of metalinguistic, “infralinguistic” (on this side of the linguistic).

In the end, in working through these concerns with craft and inspiration, poetry and prophecy, Leavitt (1997b: 161) argues:

What we call poetic language is language, whatever its specific form, in which we think we recognize a tilt toward the metalinguistic. The common marked forms of poetic language are always signaling or provoking this tilt [...] what we call possessed or prophetic language is language in which we recognize a tilt toward “infralinguistic.” Whatever its poetic qualities for its hearers, such language, either through internal characteristics or its context, conveys that it is being emitted without deliberation, without reflexivity, whether it is understood as rising from the unconscious, emerging out of a demonic seizure, or descending from a god.

It seems clear from Leavitt's (1997b) discussion that craft and inspiration are not mutually exclusive rather they are tilts one way or another. As we will see below, craft and inspiration can and do, at times, interanimate each other. The line between craft and inspiration is, sometimes, and often enough, none at all.

If Leavitt's summary of this Western tradition is apt, then this raises the normal anthropological concerns—envisioned by Leavitt—of their applicability in a variety of cultural contexts. Keeping Leavitt's discussion in mind, I want to now turn to a variety of contexts to get a sense of that applicability—that is to show the ways that this approach may be useful in exploring the diversity of poetic practices as articulated by poets in a variety of cultural contexts. I also want to highlight the slippage, the ambiguity that Leavitt identifies in the distinction between "craft" and "inspiration"—if, as Jakobson (1959: 238) suggests, the pun and ambiguity "reigns over poetic art," I want to suggest that bivalency—that simultaneity—also plays a key role in the notion of authorship. Poetry isn't just ambiguous in content, it is ambiguous in authorship as well.

### Navajo Poets

Written poetry among Navajos seems to have begun in the early 20th century and was deeply intertwined with the coming of Western educational systems (namely, schools) (see Webster, 2009). This is not to say, however, that Navajos did not have a rich array of verbal artistic practices that have, to varying degrees, influenced contemporary written poetry (Webster, 2009). Western literary conventions—from sestinas to limericks—have also influenced contemporary Navajo poetry (see Webster, 2009; Belin and Webster, 2012). Whatever its origins though, by the time of my original fieldwork on the Navajo Nation in 2000-2001, many Navajos were engaged in writing and performing their poetry in a variety of languages and combinations of languages (Webster, 2009, 2015). Navajo poets have been publishing their work since at least the 1960s (other poetry was published, but often as part of US Government promotional materials [see Webster, 2009, 2015]). Many of the Navajo poets I have worked with have talked of the need to rework a poem over time. The idea of a poem may come quickly, but once written down, the work and reworking of the poem begins. One poet, who is also a painter, told me that sometimes he would start a painting and realize that it was really a poem and thus set aside the painting and begin to work on writing a poem. The reverse was also true. Sometimes he would begin writing a poem and realize that it was really a painting and thus put aside the poem and take up the paint brush. Navajos also composed in a variety of mediums, with varying physicalities involved (see Ingold, 2007), some hand wrote

their poetry with pen or pencil, and some composed—typed—on the computer. Some composed by pen and then transferred the poems to the computer and in that transferring editing took place. Some, in particular Rex Lee Jim, would compose a poem in their head and work on it, trying it out with friends and family, for a time before they finally wrote the poem down.

I should note that after the name of the poet in the signature for some Navajo poetry there is the verb form *'áyiilaa* 'he/she made it' (from the verb stem *-yaa* 'to make, to do' [Young and Morgan, 1992: 682]) and not *yiissob* 'to write it' (from the verb stem *-zo* 'make a line, scratch' [Young and Morgan, 1992: 757]). This form is used both in *The Navajo Times* but also in Diné College's *Hane' Naach'qah* (Begay, 1998), which glosses as 'designed stories.' The connection here, between writing and "making" seems evident in the verb forms. The creation of poetry is not seen as just "writing" (*-yaa* does have that sense as well), rather it is also understood as the "making" of something. Here are, of course, links with the Greek *poiesis* which has the etymological sense also of "making" (Leavitt, 1997b: 129).

To flesh out some of these issues, here I provide an extended transcript of an interview I did with Rex Lee Jim in October of 2000 at Canyon de Chelly National Monument. While many of Jim's (1995, 2010) are short, they should not be confused with haikus. Though some Navajo poets I know have experimented with writing haiku poetry in Navajo and in English, Jim has been explicit about rejecting a connection between his short poems and haikus. Our conversation began with me asking him questions about a manuscript—*spirit echoes spirit*—that he had shared with me earlier. What was interesting to me, given Jim's reputation as a poet who wrote in Navajo, was that the book was almost entirely in English (the poems were all in English). Though, stylistically, it did resemble some of Jim's poetry in Navajo as well. In an interview, not the one transcribed here, Jim told me that the choice of English or Navajo depended on the language of the poem; that is, poems that needed to be expressed primarily in Navajo were written primarily in Navajo and poems that needed to be expressed primarily in English were written primarily in English. Form and content were here intertwined (see Webster, 2004, 2016).

The presentation is organized into lines based on pausing (a blank line indicates a longer pause). I do this not to argue that Jim (or I) spoke in poetry that night, but rather to give a sense of the cadence, the rhythm of the conversation. I will intersperse commentary that will clarify some of what Jim tells me. I don't claim to clarify all or even most of what Jim told me, but I hope enough to make my interpretations below sensible. I have also discussed portions of this transcript in more detail elsewhere (Webster, 2016). I will present a conversation with the Navajo poet Blackhorse Mitchell with a similar format.

(RLJ = Rex Lee Jim; AKW = Anthony K Webster):

RLJ: English allows me to go beyond  
what Navajo has to offer  
it offers new experiences  
new possibilities  
and when I switch to English  
what it also does for me is  
when I switch back to Navajo  
it says, “why not in Navajo in this area as well”

AKW: mhm

RLJ: so it allows me to push the Navajo language in those areas  
and in so doing  
I think I’m expanding the capacity of the language  
in many ways  
for one way come up with new vocabulary  
to to explain the possibilities in certain areas that didn’t exist before  
and but exist in English  
and I think it’s the same way the other way around  
English has its own limitations  
and boundaries  
and when I switch to English  
and I come to the realization that  
I can’t push English beyond this  
and  
it’s it’s the reality  
it’s a new reality  
what Navajo can do so easily  
and so  
it allows me to push English  
into those areas as well  
and when the two work together  
it pushes me as a person  
further than either one of the languages could

I then ask Jim about something I’ve noticed in his poems—and something that Navajos, including Jim, have begun to intimate to me as well—first in the English poems, but over time in the Navajo poems as well. I call it here



alliteration—Jim takes up that term—and homophones—in more technical garb I have called it phonological iconicity, Navajos that I know call it *saad aheelt'éego diits'a'* 'words that resemble each other by sound' or punning (Jim too will call it punning) (see Mitchell and Webster, 2011; Webster, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). What I am after here is whether or not the puns precede the poem or if they come after the creation of the poem. Jim's answer suggests—at least for the poems Jim takes responsibility for (see below)—that both ways happen. It should be clear as well that the title of Jim's manuscript—*spirit echoes spirit*—as well as poems in it also partook of the use of punning. Punning, after all, is one of the ways that Jim pushed English and Navajo.

AKW: Well one of the things you do in the poems, at least that I saw, was that you use a lot of alliteration in a in the poems  
a lot of homophones as well  
words that sound same  
you know  
do you think that's an English thing or do you think a  
alliteration is common in Navajo

RLJ: I think  
alliteration, whatever that means [laughter]  
is how the human mind works  
it's sorta like associations

AKW: mhm

RLJ: You think of something  
tree  
then you think of the branches  
and that looks like broccoli  
then it goes to broccoli  
that looks like food  
you know how it starts connected, I think

AKW: Right

RLJ: for me the alliteration it's something similar to that  
that there's certain words  
and yet they look like something else  
or they sound like something else

and there just connected different thoughts  
and it's sorta like a spider web  
seems like they're very connected  
they're fine lines where  
I guess in a sense  
the whole idea, for me, of alliteration is like  
something that's fragile like a cobweb  
that  
that you could read it one way  
and have a totally different interpretation  
but if you read it a different way  
you'll have a different meaning, a different experience  
and that life is like that  
there are these interconnections  
that  
you go into a situation  
you could think of it as hardship  
or you could think of it as a great challenge

AKW: mhm

RLJ: you think of the situation and say  
give up  
or you could say  
“how do I resolve this”  
or go into a situation and say, um  
“I can't do this.”  
Or you could say, “this is a great chance for me to learn something  
new.”  
There's always that.  
And so I think of some these alliterations  
works that way  
allows you to go either this way or this way or another way  
regardless of what will be up or down  
but when you begin to  
understand how that works  
then you can go  
any direction and come back to the center again  
And I think for me the idea behind the earth is round

if you can go deep down into it  
 you get to the core where it's all the same  
 and if you know  
 if you get to the core you can surface on any part of the earth  
 and you'll understand the situation there  
 people always say you need to go beyond language, beyond culture  
 you need to go beyond the personal things to understand others  
 I disagree with that  
 I think  
 we must go through culture and language  
 we must go through ourselves  
 to get to the core

AKW: mhm

RLJ: and that means going deep and within  
 and once we do that we can surface  
 anywhere  
 and understand  
 the heart of things  
 that  
 an example is the more and more Navajo I think I become  
 the more and more genuinely Navajo I think I become

AKW: mhm

RLJ: people like my work more  
 even though they're not Navajos  
 and I've come to the realization  
 that in doing that  
 I become more and more human  
 and when I get to the core of humanity  
 through my own language and my own  
 biases and prejudices and preferences  
 I come to realize  
 "hey, I'm a human being and this is who I am"  
 and what I speak and write out of that  
 others understand that  
 the language may be different  
 the images may be a little bit different

maybe more desert coyote images  
but  
when you really get to the heart of it  
you ask them they say, "yes I understand that"  
and so I think alliteration  
allows  
that to take place  
if you want to get at the heart of the poem  
then you can go either way  
and  
that's the way it is

AKW: mhm

RLJ: you know it's almost like  
you were talking about the sexual symbols  
or images [laughter]  
and all that you know  
and I know I did a lot of that on purpose  
it's there  
yes it's there  
the sex images are there  
and when you get to the heart of it  
you can go either way  
and it's right

AKW: mhm

RLJ: and  
so it  
I think that one  
so it is a conscious choice to really look at it  
and the sounds too  
that  
and even in Navajo  
Navajo is very good at  
alliteration and puns  
even the pronunciation  
if you slightly pronounce it just a little bit  
because it's a tonal language

you change the entire meaning of the whole thing  
a lot of the poems in Navajo  
are written that way  
especially the smaller ones

AKW: Oh

RLJ: and so it allows  
because of the alliteration, the sounds, puns  
and  
it's  
there's so much in there  
and yeah they're done by choice

I miss a great opportunity here to ask him about this and, instead, I then ask Jim about why he uses the Navajo words *sin* 'song' and *saad* 'language, word' to bracket the English language poems in *spirit echoes spirit*. Here is part of what he tells me:

RLJ: Because *saad*  
I guess you could translate it as word

AKW: mhm

RLJ: or language

AKW: mhm

RLJ: or speech  
but before that for me  
*saad* means sound  
sound that communicates  
[car goes by loudly]  
even if my eyes are closed the sound that just passed by  
tells me  
car went by

AKW: Right

RLJ: and if you live way out in the country  
you can even get to know the sound of vehicles

by hearing it you know who's coming  
and it's the same way if somebody knocks at your door  
sometimes you will know whose action by the way they knock  
or whether if it's midnight and someone starts banging at your door  
that tells you something  
So for me it is  
Sound  
That conveys some sense of meaning  
That communicate  
Something that I  
Perceive as meaningful  
That  
Affects me in some way  
Even the sound of crickets [can be heard in background]  
They remind me of whole history  
They remind me of things that I've suppressed  
And force me  
To recall those and think them through again  
Or it could remind me of happy times  
And allow me to dance and smile  
And so for me  
Sound is the beginning of all things.

Jim's comment that "sound is the beginning of all things" is not idiosyncratic. Maureen Schwarz (1997: 35-37) provides a number of conversations with Navajos about the primacy and importance of sound (see also Reichard, 1944). Another poet, Blackhorse Mitchell, once told me, when discussing the approach some linguists and anthropologists take to the Navajo language, that "the validity of Navajo is in its sounds, not in the neat things it does" (see Webster, 2015a). Sound in these poems is quite important. Jim told me that as well in a later interview (see Webster, 2006, 2015c). Indeed, he challenges the conventional translation of *saad* into English as 'word, language' and argues instead that *saad* is "sound that communicates" and "sound that conveys some sense of meaning." As Gary Witherspoon (1977: 60) suggests, "to the Navajo, sound is air in motion, and speech is highly refined and patterned air in motion."

I then ask him what his poetry is attempting to do:

RLJ: There's a sense of yes you bring it up  
But there's a sense of an offer  
Some form of solution  
Some form of healing  
So there's a balance

AKW :And that healing is...

RLJ :Well first and foremost it begins with thinking the way  
you think  
when you look at these images  
and start thinking about it, and say, "yes it's true"

AKW :hmm

RLJ :okay  
so now do you, what needs to be done  
what does the poem suggest  
what does it say

Slightly later Jim expands on this point:

RLJ :There's always  
the poem presents and identifies a problem  
I shouldn't say always  
many of the poems  
identifies a problem and at the same time offers a solution  
of something  
and I will not tell you all about that [laughter]  
you have to come to that yourself [laughter]

[I flip the tape and SIDE B begins]

RLJ: And some of them, say,  
"we have this problem"  
Okay  
Now what do Navajo stories say about them  
What do the gods say about them  
And you pull various images from different places  
And put them together

And some of them like  
*náhookqs*  
*ndi*  
*náhookqs*  
or  
*ni*  
*eiya*  
*yaah ni*  
they come in the middle of the night  
and you get up  
and write them down  
and the next day you try to improve on it  
so you write several pages that doesn't work  
you try to add or delete something  
and it doesn't work  
they just come  
and they are considered masterpieces  
you can't do anything to it  
I've tried and it doesn't work  
and in many ways I feel that it's not my work  
because  
they just appear  
out of nowhere  
and sometimes I think about what Navajos say about the Little Wind  
telling you  
something [wind in background]  
after so much experience  
and so much trials and errors  
that somehow your human mind is ready to receive something  
from somewhere else  
or maybe has already been there  
but you were just too  
egotistical or full of it  
that you never allowed it to sink in [laughter]  
I don't know how it works  
all I know is it feels like somebody is telling you to  
write it  
and so some of them come like that  
and so some of the poems like that



I don't know whether I can claim them or not

AKW: So when do you do your writing then?

RLJ: When I'm not being interviewed [laughter]

AKW: Okay. [laughter]

Besides when you are not being interviewed [laughter]

When do you write your poems?

RLJ: I have a notebook by my bed

Like sometimes ideas come to me in the middle of the night

I just wake up and write

Sometimes I write for the rest of the night

Or sometimes I just jot things down and go back to sleep

And sometimes I compose in my mind

And a poem is in my head for years before I write them down

I recite them, I redo it

Just, um, like the one *náhookqs ndi náhookqs*

Like I said I hiked top of Lukachukai Mountains two in the morning  
with snow

February

And repeated that phrase

*náhookqs*

*ndi*

*náhookqs*

To actually look at it

And to then look down here

And what does it mean

And I'd try it out by myself

Or sometimes when I'm with friends

Or sometimes we have a cookout at night with my family

And I'd repeat it

*náhookqs*

*ndi*

*náhookqs*

What does the whole thing mean

What does it do to a person

And finally after so many years

Of saying that and doing creates

Okay, I'll write it down  
So you write it down.  
Lot of time  
With these shorter poems come that way  
And some of them are really just sayings that my grandfather use  
to say  
[I have edited out some material here for issues of space]  
And so sometimes it comes out of what others have said

Elsewhere, I have translated and discussed the *náhookqs* 'north, to revolve, the Big Dipper' poem (Webster, 2016). Jim (2010) has translated and discussed both the poems he recited that night as well. A little bit later Jim follows up by stating:

RLJ: So inspirations do come from conversations, experiences,  
and realities,  
and out of nowhere, middle of the night  
and some of them  
actually come out of rigorous thinking  
a lot of reading  
lot of writing  
a lot of, you know, thinking about things  
to really think them  
some poems are just  
came to exist out of struggle  
struggle in terms of what does it mean  
I want to say this  
and I want to use this  
and all that putting it together and redoing it and all that  
And so the inspiration comes from that  
But the writing of it, no  
It normally doesn't take me long to write the poems  
But in order to do that it, like I said, takes me years to think them  
through  
And so, what does it mean  
It's almost like testing it out  
I'm sure there's probably a phrase going around my mind  
While we're doing this  
Even if it's applicable or not

So when you actually sit down  
 It sorta just comes  
 At least how the Navajo ones come about  
 I don't know about the English  
 Maybe something similar

This is, for me, an incredibly elaborate reflection on, among other things, Jim's theory of poetry, his views on the nature of language, and the ways he composes his poetry. I have discussed some of these issues elsewhere (Webster, 2016) and, so, here will focus on the question of where poetry comes from. To simplify here a bit, for Jim there appear to be three ways that he creates poetry: 1) he works and reworks a poem, often through "rigorous thinking" or "inspiration" from "conversations, experiences, and realities" (we can call this the craft of poetry); 2) he creates poetry based on what he hears others say (call this, if you like, found poetry in the words of others); and 3) they come to him by way of Little Wind (*nítch'i' áłts'ítstí*) and resist reworking (call this, then, "inspired speech" from a nonhuman agent). Note as well, that the craft of poetry is often collaborative as well. He tries out those poems on friends and family to see how they work.

Let me quote James McNeley (1981: 36) on Little Wind in Navajo philosophy, "it is these Little Winds sent by the Holy Ones that are thought to provide the means of good Navajo thought and behavior." He goes on to note that, "Little Winds sent from the Holy Ones in the four directions work to strengthen the Wind within one towards the end that it will continue to be capable of helping the individual to lead a good life" (McNeley, 1981: 49). Little Winds are messengers/messages from the Holy Ones (deities) to Navajos on proper moral behavior.

I should note that the messages from these Little Winds are "absolutely faultless" (*ts'idá ba'adinii*). McNeley (1981: 54) makes this point when he notes that:

The complex of behavioral traits subsumed by the term "being faultless" are a function of existing under the influence of aspects of Wind that are also faultless. This Wind is sent to the individual by deities such as Talking Gods and Calling Gods who are inner forms of the sacred mountains and who are themselves absolutely faultless.

Here it is well to reflect on Jim's description of those poems as "masterpieces." The poems were with Jim long before he wrote them down. He recited them to friends and family. These poems, having come from Little Wind, resist any tampering with or reworking by Jim. They are complete unto themselves. He just

needs to hear them, to recognize them. This hearing is done by not being “too egotistical or full of it.” In this sense, these “masterpieces” aren’t the work of Jim.<sup>2</sup> He can’t really take credit for them. Other poems he works and reworks and hence can take credit for, but not these “masterpieces.” Here, in Jim’s words, are poems created both by craft and by inspiration. But they seem to be different kinds of poems—even if they may look similar. Here we find a limit to the distinction between craft and inspiration, metalinguistic reflexivity and infralinguistic flattening of reflexivity as described by Leavitt (1997b). It may not always be possible to discern the tilt towards reflexivity and craft or towards a flattening or lack of reflexivity but of inspiration. One suspects that even Jim might not always be able to discern that distinction.

For comparative purposes, below is a conversation I had with the poet Blackhorse Mitchell on the origins of the first poem he ever wrote. I have discussed this transcript elsewhere in relation to the boarding school context and in regards Mitchell’s relationship with his teacher T. D. Allen (Webster, 2015a). Here I want to stress the way that Mitchell came to write his poem ‘The Drifting Lonely Seed.’ The poem was written in class at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) and was a part of Allen’s attempt, fully in line with the modernist Western logic so usefully described by Wilf (2011) concerning creativity, to get young Navajos to “express themselves” (see Webster, 2015a). However, the impetus for writing this poem was twofold, according to Mitchell’s recollection here. First, Mitchell wanted to say something, to describe something, something about “freedom.” Second, Mitchell saw “cotton” come floating into the classroom and this inspired Mitchell—note the use of “wo:w” here—to write his poem. This “wow-ness” seems to constitute for Mitchell a moment of inspiration. He sees the cotton floating free of the classroom and then imaginatively connects it with his own situation. I should add that while Mitchell appears to “read” the poem, the version he produces differs from the written version in terms of tense-marking and lexical choices (Webster, 2015a). (BM = Blackhorse Mitchell; AW = Anthony Webster).

AW: when you first started writing poetry  
that was because  
you were in school

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2. Compare these “masterpieces” from the Little Winds with the dream songs found among other Southwestern peoples (see, for example, BAHR, PAUL, and JOSEPH 1997 on Pima songs). BAHR *et al*, 1997 discuss as well the importance of ambiguity, not just of reference, but of authorship. Who exactly is the “I” of the songs? As a model for a *humanities of speaking*, I can recommend no work more than BAHR *et al*, 1997, *Ants and Orioles: Showing the Art of Pima Poetry*.

BM: mhm

AW: and you were I assume learning to write English

BM: RIGHT

AW: and so poetry was a way to learn to write English?

BM: I think it was mostly describing  
or my thinking was I was trying to say something  
because a lot of times  
when you're in a boarding school  
your teacher does not allow you

AW: mmm, I see

BM: they kind of don't allow you  
and there you're trying to say  
you want to speak a:nd  
you don't, you don't have MUCH  
you're, you're to sit there and learn

AW: mhm

BM: that was the kind of thing  
SO:  
the best way was I'm gonna write about  
like the dormitory  
NOBODY sees what  
what what what horrible things  
or what the impact is to stay in the dorm at the time  
the bell rings and then they say, "stay in you can't get out"  
you go to your room  
and you're sittin' there  
you're restless  
only thing you can do is look out the window  
BUT HERE  
look I can go in and out  
and you can too  
so: it's the whole freedom  
but in the boarding school  
you have to

you have TIME limit  
so those were just some of things that I:’m  
talking about  
and then when I’m WRITING  
it always has to do with  
freedom  
and a:h I think the first first ah  
[BM gets up, walks across room and gets Miracle Hill]  
first ah poem that I was working on  
there was no chances  
[BM comes back and sits]  
there was no chance of like  
to ASK question  
even though the instructor say, “you need to ask question”

AW: a:h

BM: And so hunh  
if you’re  
if we’re FREE to ask questions  
in my  
it may be different  
but in this case  
there was none  
and after writing this  
the first poem  
that I ever came up with  
she thought this was great  
she didn’t see what I’m trying to s:  
STILL she didn’t see what I was trying to say  
as a student  
so I wrote  
because I saw this  
cotton  
somehow it came past the window into the classroom  
and it was just  
I was watching it  
and then I thought, “wo:w”  
so this is what I did  
I put  
the DRIFTING lonely seed

FROM the casein dark blue sky  
through the emptiness of space  
A sailing wisp of cotton  
NEVER have I been so: thrill  
the drifti:ng lo:nely: see:d  
came past my barred window  
whirling orbit  
it land before me  
as though it were a woolly la:mb  
(see where I'm thinking)  
UNtouch, UNtame, and alone  
walk atop my desk  
stepping daintily  
REACHING out my hands I found you  
gentle, weightless, tantalizing  
I blew you out through barricaded window  
you prance  
circle around me  
sharing with me your airy freedom  
now if she was intelligent  
she would have found what I'm saying  
and she thought that was a gre:at pi:ece of writing

AW: what did she think it was about

BM: she thought I was learning my tense

AW: ah

BM: grammar skills

AW: she thought you were learning your tense grammar, I see

BM: she didn't see:  
my thinking is:  
listen to me  
again  
as an instructor  
she did not see what I'm saying

In another example, Mitchell describes how he heard a non-Navajo tourist talking about the "beauty of Navajoland" and that talk upset him and thus led him to write a poem that uses the tourist's words in an ironic refrain that calls into question the "beauty of Navajoland" (see Webster, 2015a). In that poem, Mitchell is trying to get both Navajos and non-Navajos to really see the ugliness—the disorder—on the Navajo Nation and, in so recognizing that ugliness, to begin to restore the Navajo Nation to order or beauty (see, again, Webster, 2015a).

Having described some of the ways that Navajos poets talk about creating (or not creating) their poetry, I want to now look at several other ethnographic descriptions of the creative process. I will, however, continue to circle back to Navajo creative practices as they are relevant.

### Afghan Poets

Olszewska (2015) provides an insightful discussion of the social lives of poetry written by Afghan refugees in Iran. Olszewska (2015: 129) notes that, "poets themselves stressed their unique individuality, saying that they most definitely were different from ordinary people: more sensitive, and with a more acute perception of people and the world." This extraordinariness of poets—this poetic sensibility—was often, especially by female poets, more associated with women than with men (Olszewska, 2015: 129). Poets often began writing poetry in their teens and this was poetry that was often inspired by, "the first flush of romantic feeling or other intense emotions." Poets often, as well, considered themselves and were considered by others to be "weird people"—introverted or slightly crazy (Olszewska, 2015: 128). Olszewska (2015: 129-130) notes that, "having absorbed, unconsciously or through study, the principles of *vazn* (meter), *qāfieh* (rhyme), a poet will begin to compose when the appropriate inspiration strikes." Olszewska then provides discussions by three poets of their composition practices. I reproduce them in full because of the insight they provide into the way these Afghan poets conceptualize their poetic practice.

The first quote comes from Sayyed Abu Taleb Mozaffari, a poet and the director of the Dorr-e Dari Cultural Institute, where Olszewska did much of her fieldwork (bracketed information is from Olszewska):

My method of writing poetry is not such that I sit down somewhere and pick up a pen and write a poem. Stories—yes, I sit down and write stories, or articles. But poetry... several couplets [at a time], in an unconscious, very natural way from an ordinary



incident, an ordinary feeling, come to me and I write them down—whether they come in my sleep, or at work, or on a bus. Wherever I may be, I write them down, and then I complete/perfect it (*takmil-esh mikonam*). The coming of a poem, the process of a poem, is very natural in my mind. And I think that these things don't need any external factors. Rather, it's just those inner feelings of a person that combine with his experiences in a single moment and flow from his tongue (*bar zabān-e ādam jāri misheh*), that's all. In older times, people thought some kind of deities or jinn—the Arabs thought that jinns would suggest poems or that there was some kind of supernatural inspiration (*elhāh-e gheibi*), but I don't believe that. It's not an external thing, but the emotions of a person himself that in one instant, cause something of a particular form to take shape and emerge (Olszewska 2015: 130).

Notice the either/or quality of external or internal sources for poetry. Poetry either came from *jinns* or it comes from something internal, some emotion. This contrasts with Jim's discussion above which posits that some poetry comes from an external (nonhuman) source and other poetry from an internal place that is inspired by external realities and the like.

Elyas Alavi, another Afghan poet who is somewhat well-known in both Afghan and Iranian literary communities, tells Olszewska (2015: 130) the following about poetic inspiration:

At the beginning, a feeling reaches out to you [...]. It can come from seeing an event, a poor person, a beggar, a photograph. Or for example it can be something in your mind, something that comes into your mind at one particular instant. After that... a spark is struck and the usually one couplet, or one sentence, or one word... comes from somewhere and the it keeps on, like a... we say *khoreh*—it's something like that—I think it's an insect—it doesn't stop, it keeps eating—so like a *khoreh*, it eats at your mind and keeps on eating. And you can't stop anymore and you're obliged to do something to it, you play with it and play with it and keep adding words. And this is transformed into a poem. And then when that moment is over and that feeling has ended, when you have turned to your normal state, you can look back at it and change some parts of it a little bit.

The final quote comes from Maral Taheri, a female Afghan poet:

Today I was walking around the house—my sister is pregnant and she was in pain. I said to her, "How are you feeling?" She said, "I'm not bad, but the baby is kicking in my stomach and it's a good feeling." At that very moment this morning something came to my mind, *Harakāt-e gij-e janini ke darun-e man ast/ talkh ast o banafsh*, "The giddy movements of the foetus inside me / are bitter and purple." It comes at a moment like that, an essence, and then it cuts off. That was all it was. I can't say exactly where I get inspiration from. It's not clear at all, but it can come to me at any time—in the street, on the bus, in my bed, anywhere (Olszewska 2015: 131).

As Olszewska (2015: 131) notes as well, poems are largely composed not on paper, but "in the mind." The writing down of the poem came later. And the writing was done in notebooks or on a computer. After this flourish of inspiration and composition, poets often seek out feedback from friends or fellow poets (Olszewska, 2015: 132).

Finally, as Olszewska (2015: 131) argues about the values that attend to the composition of poetry have certain historical links to Persian literature:

This emphasis on autonomous inspiration, individual creativity, and originality was often highlighted as a feature of contemporary poetry, but scholars of classical Persian literature stress that individual talent and originality were always admired [...]. But they were also always situated in the context of a highly intertextual literary field in which certain forms of poetic dialogue and imitation were permissible.

Creativity has often been noted as an important component of Navajo conceptions of language and verbal life (see Witherspoon, 1977: 181-185). There is a sense among some Navajos that the creativity found in contemporary poetry written and performed in Navajo is to be understood as a *refinding* of prior utterances and forms—forms and utterances that were "put down" by the deities for Navajos to use. Like sacred mountains, the Navajo language is part of a larger category of *diné bá niilyáii* 'things that were created/placed down for the Navajo.' In this view, the Navajo language is a "living language" or *saad niilyá* to be treated with respect (see Peterson and Webster, 2013). What seems interesting here is that for some Navajo poets, while there is inspiration and creativity, they are not wholly autonomous or original. It is a *refinding* of what has been put down before. The creativity here is in the capacity to recognize such prior utterances

in a way that is similar to Jim's view that one must be willing—not too full of it—to recognize poetry that comes by way of Little Winds.

### Yemeni Cassette Poets

Building on the work of Steven Caton (1990) on Yemeni poetry, Flagg Miller (2007) investigates some of the composition practices of Yemeni cassette poets. Miller (2007) outlines a particularly interesting theory of poetry and poetry composition. According to Miller (2007: 297), there is a relationship between 'poetry' (*shi'r*) and 'feelings' (*shu'ūr*) which suggest "poetry's foundation in bodily emotions." Miller goes on to discuss the views of the important late Yemeni poet 'Abdallah al-Baraddūnī who stated that composition begins with, "the desire to say poetry within" (Miller, 2007: 297). Poetry emerges, according to his view, "from a particular yearning to give inward 'feelings' vocal expression" (Miller, 2007: 297). Miller (2007: 297) goes on to describe it in the following manner:

Such a desire [to give inward feelings vocal expression] [...] is founded in a poet's reaction to something: an event, a piece of news, a poem received from another poet, a community issue. Poets describe this experience of responsive desire as an acoustic, aural agitation that is untranslatable in the language of humankind. Poets hear an indecipherable "whispering" (*waswasah*) or "babble" (*haraj*) from unknown realms [...] one hears what lies "beyond the language of ordinary talk and is driven to decipher its intended meanings." At this stage, poets suffer from bitter feelings in the heart (*qalb*) and the liver (*kibd*) [...] To prevent these whisperings from leading to psychological stress, madness, or even death, poets must use their faculties of reason (*aql*) and cleverness (*shaṭārah*) [...] to translate such raw, prearticulated energy into poetic form.

Miller (2007: 297) goes on to note that while in this place of heightened emotions, "poets become compelled to translate the language beyond 'ordinary talk'—to 'say poetry' through the medium of poetic muses." As for the muses:

These muses are known as the *hājīs* and the *ḥalīlah* [...] the *hājīs*, akin to poetical savvy, enables the poet to tailor emotional murmurings to social language [...]. By granting exceptional percipience, the *hājīs* allows the poet to produce meanings that endure [...]. The second, more volatile muse is *ḥalīlah*. The *ḥalīlah* grants access to aesthetic brilliance, enabling poets to produce immediate, ad-hoc verses that

may be eloquent, penetrating, and at times verbally dazzling but may not have the broader social meaning that can be summoned up by the *ḥājīs* (Miller, 2007: 297-298).

The transition from this form of inspiration leads to the crafting of the poem. As Miller (2007: 298) notes, “in the period of inspiration, when a flood of disjunctured sounds, words, and half-formed ideas demands inscription, the poet must initiate composition by first selecting a metrical structure (*wazn*).” Once the metrical structure has been decided on, “a poet begins assembling the broader sonic contours of the composition with the poem’s discursive content” (Miller, 2007: 299). This process varies among poets. As Miller (2007: 299) describes:

The process of writing down verses that are first heard and imagined by the poet can vary considerably between individuals. Some of the finest poets [...] can quickly combine a repertoire of verbal formulas and conventional idioms with their own unique message and style. Others compose more slowly and laboriously. As one poet explained to me, they must work to iron smooth [...] the rougher seams of their text. Such composers are occasionally known as compilers (*muṣannifs*) rather than true poets (*shā’irs*). The process of composing, writing, and editing typically involves several drafts, even if scribbled messily on the back and front of a single sheet of paper. Finally, most poets test their verses out on friends, revising them where necessary before publicly releasing them.

There is in Miller’s discussion of Yemeni poets an interesting twining of inspiration and craft. Like Jim, and other Navajo poets I have talked with, Yemeni poets “test” their poems on audience and revise accordingly. The poem, then, is thus a dialogic creation at this point. The audience here is—if not a co-author—a co-editor at least (see Duranti, 1986).

An important point here is that cassette poets place a great deal of importance in the written version of the poem. Thus the poetry performed on cassettes (often by a singer and not the poet) often has a written version as well. As Miller (2007: 301) notes:

Poets have come to feel their own voices pale in comparison to those of well-known amateur or semiprofessional cassette singers and are almost always dissuaded from singing their own work. As a result, poets devote considerable attention to preparing written copies of their work.

Here, as Miller (2007: 301) notes, the proper writing equipment must be used: a good pen, fine paper without lines (even if, as Miller notes, poets often use three-hole punched notebook paper to write their poems), sometimes too a typewriter or computer is used. Singers, who will animate these poems on the cassette tapes, “appreciate written copies of the poem” (Miller, 2007: 301).

### Israeli Poetry Workshops

Eitan Wilf (2011) builds on Webb Keane’s (2007) concern with modern subjects and notions of sincerity as it relates to poetry in Israeli poetry workshops. Wilf (2011) describes the theories of personhood that seem to be entailed in a modernist conception of inspiration as articulated in these poetry workshops. He describes, for example, the ways that these poetry workshops seek, “to enable poets to write regardless of mood or inspiration” (Wilf, 2011: 475). Getting, that is, to “self-expression” without going through the difficult process of “inspiration.” Wilf (2011: 470-471) traces this history as a convergence of a modernist conception of the subject by way of Sentimentalism and Romanticism:

Romanticism criticized Sentimentalism for promoting public displays of emotions that were conducive to insincerity and resolved the problem by advancing a normative ideal of radical interiority and self-creativity, while retaining Sentimentalism’s emphasis on the role of the imagination, feelings, and pleasure [...]. Romanticism argued that each individual has his or her own nature or voice with which he or she must be in touch and to which he or she must remain faithful. However, crucially, such organic metaphors also stipulated that this nature cannot be known prior to its articulation.

How does this play out in the poetry workshop investigated by Wilf? A number of exercises were created to produce written texts (Wilf, 2011: 475-476). After that, “participants were instructed to examine in detail the written products that emerged from these exercises, to circle those parts or word combinations that they thought were poetically dense and that they experienced as ‘surprising’ and ‘exciting,’ and then to work with these combinations and try to develop them into complete poems” (Wilf, 2011: 476). As Wilf (2011: 476) notes, “the products of these exercises were not considered to be reflective of the participants’ interiority in any meaningful way.” It was “unusual word combinations” that seemed to matter most (Wilf, 2011: 476). It was the word combinations that were then developed into poetry and hence examples of “self-expression.” It is *in the articulation of those word combinations* that one

can begin to “explore” one’s authentic voice. The issue here is not “sincerity” so much as “authenticity”—“I follow what the voice of my nature calls me to do” (Wilf, 2011: 472).

For many of the Navajo poets that I have worked with, the question of sincerity has not been at the forefront of their poetry, nor for some has “self-expression” (though certainly Navajos were encouraged to think of “self-expression” in United States schooling contexts [see Webster, 2015a and below]). Both Jim and Mitchell stressed the “true-ness” of the images in their poems. The revelation, if we want to use that word, is not internal, but rather to see the world as it *really* is. Describing the “ugliness,” for example, of the Navajo Nation is important, but that is a different question than sincerity or an expression of some authentic self. “Ugliness” (lack of order, control, and disharmony) needs to be accurately described, not sincerely described. On the other hand, at a Writer’s Camp I attended at Rough Rock Demonstration School (and led by Navajo poets) in the summer of 2000, a philosophy very much like the one described by Wilf (2011) for poetry workshops was in play as well. There students were encouraged to use their five senses to produce writing that could then be converted into a poem. Interestingly, some Navajos talk of seven senses and include as one of those senses the feelings that language has on a person (see, for example, Schwarz, 1997). Thus the five senses perspective reproduces a Western understanding of the senses.

### **Growing into Bergamo Poetry**

Before concluding, I want to turn to one final example on growing into being a poet. Jillian Cavanaugh (2009:98-99) describes the way that poetry writing in the Italian community of Bergamo was a kind of age grade accomplishment. As Cavanaugh (2009:98-99) describes it:

Writing poetry was closely linked with reaching a particular stage in life, becoming, as they put it, “*di una certa età*” (of a certain age). Most poets described to me how they had begun to write verse as they approached or went into retirement, a time of leisure, and perhaps, increased contemplation.

This certain age-ness of poets was so, as Cavanaugh (2009:98) notes, even as there was a bit of a revival of interest in poetry in 1999-2000. Bergamo poets—predominately male poets—learn their trade, to invoke Yeats here, through poetry performances during their lives and often become active poets, writers of poetry, later in life. Linked, I should add, with this certain age-ness of poets, was also a valorizing of “older forms of [Bergamasco] words” that “were often

regarded as sounding more poetic, and were savored by audience members as recovered treasures” (Cavanaugh, 2009: 101). Poets and poetry should show, display, their age. It is a practice done in old words and by old(er) people. This concern with old words, with the social aesthetics of Bergamasco, is implicated in a general language shift from Bergamasco to Italian occurring and Bergamaschi—especially poets—are quite alert and concerned about that shift (Cavanaugh, 2009).

Navajo poets run the gamut from the very young to the very old and there does not seem to be an expectation that a poet must be an elder. While elders are often seen to have more facility with the Navajo language (see Field, 2009), this does not seem to hinder young people from writing poetry (and, indeed, young people are encouraged to write poetry in Navajo in various Navajo language classes [see Webster, 2009]). Like with Bergamasco, today there is a general concern with a language shift from Navajo to English by many Navajos, and there is also a view of Navajo as a (more) poetic language. Laura Tohe has explained that, for her anyway, Navajo was a poetic language, English was a “flat” language (see Webster, 2015a: 24-25; see also Webster, 2009). Here is how Tohe explains this view to a non-Navajo audience in Carbondale, IL in 2006. I have discussed this example at length elsewhere (Webster, 2015a: 24-25; Webster, 2009: 209-213), here I present the transcript as an example of the ways that Tohe describes both the poetic quality of Navajo, but also her love of certain Navajo words (though, in this case, there is nothing particularly “old” about *nihik'inizdidláád*):<sup>3</sup>

the Navajo language is very poetic  
when I first started writing  
I used to think about poems in Navajo  
and then write  
turn them into English  
and I guess maybe in some ways I still do that  
because like I said the language is very poetic  
the way it looks at the world  
the world in terms of dualities  
and even that  
there's this line in that poem about female rain  
about how the luminescence is all around

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3. The delight in language, the love of linguistic form, should be a key concern for a humanities of speaking (see EPPS, WEBSTER, WOODBURY 2017; see also LEAVITT, 2011).

it took a long time to try  
to find an equivalent in English  
because the word itself, a:h  
there's that one word  
I love that word in Navajo  
*nibik'inizdidláád* which  
it's an action  
you know in Navajo it's verb based  
and so *nibik'inizdidláád* means you know  
this light  
just  
poured over us  
or among us  
and there's this relationship you have with the light  
but in the English it seems a little flat  
when you say luminescence all around  
it's just like a reporting about what happened  
and there's none of that  
personal connection  
to light

For some Navajos, Navajo is often described as the more poetic language when compared with English (Webster, 2009). Tohe describes how when she began writing poetry, the poems often began in Navajo and then she would “turn them into”—imperfectly—English. Tohe attended classes at Diné College to learn to write in Navajo and has published poems in Navajo (Tohe, 2005). Like Rex Lee Jim and Blackhorse Mitchell, she has written poetry in both Navajo and in English. Other poets, Luci Tapahonso, for example, have also talked about the ways some poems begin in Navajo and then are “translated” into English (see Webster, 2009: 26). There is a sense, then from both Tapahonso and from Tohe, that something is missing in some of the poetry written in English—that the original inspiration was in Navajo and was then converted and crafted into an English version (with traces of Navajo syntax, for example, in the English-language versions [Webster, 2009: 26]). Other Navajo poets are inspired and craft in English, their first language. Mitchell, as we saw above, was inspired to write a poem in English and he has a great love for both English and for Navajo (see Webster, 2015a).



## Conclusions

Poets are cultural, poetry too cultural. Poetry partakes, often, of both craft and inspiration—not as abstractions but as situated in time and space and within locally relevant frameworks of meaning. At the beginning of this article, I suggested that Yeats' lines displayed an essential tension in Western poetry between craft and inspiration: craft must be hidden, inspiration foregrounded. What I hope to have tracked in this article is that the interplay between craft and inspiration may be thought of as adding to the ambiguity that surrounds the poem—that rather than see it always as some kind of tension, we see it as a part of the larger ambiguity of poetry. For Rex Lee Jim, some poems are “masterpieces” from the Little Winds, other poems the work of crafting and recrafting. Discerning which is which is not so easily done from any vantage point. There is, then, not just an ambiguity within Jim's poems (see Webster, 2015, 2016, 2017), but there is also an ambiguity that surrounds the authorship of the poems. Here it is useful to mention that Jim (1995) often publishes his poetry using his Navajo name *Mazii Dinéltsoi* and not his English-language name Rex Lee Jim. The use of multiple names is not terribly surprising; other Navajos that I know have (at minimum) both an English-language and a Navajo-language name, and also have discarded names (legal and otherwise) that they used earlier in life.<sup>4</sup> My point here is the ambiguity of content and of authorship seems central to the poetry of Rex Lee Jim. But I wouldn't want to argue that this is unique to Jim. If there is a constant, to echo Jakobson (1959, 1960), it is that poetry revels in its ambiguities. But these are, again, ambiguities not just of content—the pun—but of authorship as well. In crafting a poem, poets test their poems on audiences and those audiences—of friends and family—inform revisions and reworkings. These audiences are—perhaps overstated—co-authors (but certainly co-editors). Terry Eagleton (2006: 32) says that, “a poem is a statement released into the public world for us to make of it what we may.” So too are we left to make of poets what we may. Where does craft end and inspiration begin? Even poets are not always sure. Yeats equivocates “a line will take us hours *maybe* [emphasis added]”, but then so it may not take hours, but a moment. What poets tell us about their work

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4. In much Navajo conversation, personal names are not used and the listener is invited to discern the identities of the people being discussed by reference to contextual factors and background knowledge. Ambiguity is not seen here as a problem. See, for example, McALLISTER (1980) on this point (another fine example of a humanities of speaking approach).

—their metacreative discourse (to use an ungainly turn-of-phrase)—gives us some insight into a vision of language; which is also a vision of “human beings in the world” (Williams, 1977: 21).

The goal of this article has been to survey something of the metacreative discourse about poetry—that is the ways that poets talk about the creating, crafting, and inspiration of their poems. In so doing, I have suggested something of the value of an ethnography of poetry, or poetic practice. This ethnography of poetry is a part of a broader project that Epps, Webster, and Woodbury (2017) have called a *humanities of speaking*. A humanities of speaking is focused on not just (ethno)poetic traditions, but also in the local aesthetic sensibilities that inform such practices and so too the theories, the metacreative discourse, about such (ethno)poetic practices. A humanities of speaking approach is an attempt to reunite linguistics and anthropology, to recognize its older philological origins (Turner, 2014), and to reaffirm the place of language and human beings as central to the work of anthropology. It also takes seriously attending to verbal artistry as fundamental to an understanding of the language-culture-individual nexus (Sherzer, 1987; Friedrich, 1986). Metacreative discourses are never solely about poetry, but rather reveal important concerns about notions of the self, about the place of language in human and nonhuman affairs, about the relationship between craft and inspiration, about the physicality and technologies of composing, about beauty and ugliness, and the moral and ethical dimensions of those as well. The work here is incomplete, but a sketch has been drawn. For now, like Yeats, we must be satisfied.

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Abstract: In this article, I think through questions of craft and inspiration in the creation of poetry. My interests are in the ways that languages, individuals, and cultures are intertwined. I take an ethnographic perspective on the question and a comparative approach as well. I juxtapose my work with Navajo poets with work on Afghan poets, Yemeni cassette poets, Israeli poetry workshops, and Bergamasco poets. I attend, where possible, to the views of specific poets on the relationship between craft and inspiration. With Navajo poets, I try and provide enough background to place their views in a context of a Navajo framework of meaning and moral responsibility. The goal is to begin to understand the creating of poetry as social practice. The conclusion places this work within a broader concern of a *humanities of speaking* approach.

Keywords: poetry, Navajo, creativity, verbal life, inspiration, craft, ambiguity, humanities of speaking

## *Technique et inspiration, d'après l'ethnographie de la poésie.*

*Résumé : Cet article s'appuie sur les notions de « métier » et d'inspiration dans la création poétique et s'intéresse à la façon dont langues, individus et cultures interfèrent. L'auteur associe une perspective ethnographique à une approche comparative. Ses travaux sur les poètes navajos sont juxtaposés à des études sur des poètes afghans, yéménites (qui composent pour être enregistrés sur cassettes), les ateliers poétiques israéliens et les poètes bergamasques. Autant que possible, il examine les vues de poètes spécifiques sur la relation entre travail de composition et inspiration. Pour les poètes navajos, il restitue dans une certaine mesure l'arrière-plan anthropologique pour replacer leurs vues dans le contexte des conceptions locales sur le sens et la responsabilité. Le but est de tenter de comprendre la création poétique comme une pratique sociale. La conclusion ouvre sur une perspective plus large liée aux humanités langagières.*

*Mots-clés : poésie, Navajos, créativité, vie du langage, inspiration, métier, ambiguïté, humanités langagières*

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